



## U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

### Venezuela

#### International Religious Freedom Report 2006

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The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice.

There were some efforts by the Government, motivated by political reasons, to limit the influence of religious groups in certain geographic, social, and political areas. During the period covered by this report, the Government ordered the departure of a U.S. evangelical group from indigenous areas.

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

#### Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 352,144 square miles and a population of approximately twenty-seven million. According to government estimates, 70 percent of the population was Roman Catholic, 29 percent was Protestant (usually defined as all non-Roman Catholic Christians), and the remaining 1 percent practiced other religions or was atheist. The Venezuelan Evangelical Council estimated that evangelical Protestants constituted approximately 10 percent of the population. A variety of foreign missionary groups operated in the country, including Catholics, evangelicals, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons).

There were small but influential Jewish and Muslim communities. The Jewish community numbered approximately 15,000 and was most active in the capital, Caracas. The Muslim community was concentrated among citizens of Lebanese and Syrian descent living in Nueva Esparta State and the Caracas area.

#### Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

##### Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion on the condition that the practice of a religion does not violate public morality, decency, and the public order; the Government generally respected this right in practice.

The Directorate of Justice and Religion (DJR) in the Ministry of Interior and Justice is mandated to maintain a registry of religious groups, disburse funds to religious organizations, and promote awareness and understanding among religious communities. Each group must register with the DJR to have legal status as a religious organization. Requirements for registration are largely administrative, the key exception being that groups serve the community's social interests. Some groups have complained that the process is slow and inefficient. However, in contrast with the previous report, there were no accounts of the Government refusing to register certain religious groups in the period covered by this report.

A 1964 concordat governs relations between the Government and the Vatican and provides the basis for government subsidies to the Roman Catholic Church. All registered religious groups are eligible for funding to support religious services, but most money goes to Catholic organizations because their assigned shares are fixed. While the Government continued to provide funding to Catholic-operated schools as usual, there were significant cutbacks to funding given directly to the Episcopal Conference of Venezuela (CEV). There were reports that funding increased to certain evangelical groups, although much of this was related to social projects implemented via the Government's social programs, and the specific amounts were not available.

Foreign missionaries require special visas to operate in the country. The Government estimated that there were approximately 3,000 such missionaries in 2005. Missionaries generally complained of increased refusal rates for first-time religious visas as well as for renewals. Missionary groups also generally complained that the religious visa process had become more difficult and prone to delays. After a temporary freeze in all religious visa applications, the Government returned to issuing visas, although reportedly at a slower pace than before.

In October 2005 the Mormons withdrew 219 U.S. missionaries, citing difficulties in receiving religious visas. The growing crime rate was also a factor, especially considering that the young missionaries worked in poor, high-crime neighborhoods.

The Government continued to provide annual subsidies to Catholic schools and social programs that help the poor. Other religious groups are free to establish and operate their own schools.

#### Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The constitution forbids the use of religion to avoid obeying the law or interfere with the rights of others; however, there were efforts by the Government, motivated by political reasons, to limit the influence of the Catholic Church and missionary groups in certain social and political areas.

In October 2005 President Chavez accused missionaries from the U.S.-based religious group New Tribes Mission (NTM) of contaminating the cultures of indigenous populations as well as carrying out illicit activities with the group's small aircraft. The Ministry of Interior subsequently rescinded the group's permission, granted in 1953, to conduct its social programs among indigenous tribes. The NTM appealed the order to the Supreme Court, which denied an injunction but admitted the case, which remained pending at the end of the period covered by this report. More than 100 NTM missionaries withdrew from the indigenous areas in compliance with the Government's order, abandoning properties held for decades. The Government reportedly seized some of these properties, without compensation, for its own social programs. Other foreign missionary groups working in the indigenous areas departed voluntarily after government officials warned that all such missionary activity would be stopped. Despite being duly registered religious and civil society groups, at the end of the period covered by this report foreign missionary groups were prohibited from entering indigenous areas.

In April 2006 the Government's telecommunication regulator reassigned the frequencies that had been used since 1999 by a Catholic-operated station, Vale TV. The Government contended that the frequency was needed for other purposes and had reportedly offered the Church a different frequency. Church officials said in May 2006 they hoped to reach a compromise with the Government; however, at the end of the period covered by this report no compromise had been achieved, and the station continued to broadcast.

Public confrontation between Catholic bishops and government officials continued. In April 2006 a Catholic priest working for the CEV was kidnapped and killed in Caracas under unclear circumstances. The Catholic Church clashed with government officials after the attorney general engaged in repeated public commentary on the case, blaming the priest for being partly responsible for his own death. Both sides accused the other of using the case for political gain. As of May 2006 the Government had formally charged one person for the crime but had not resolved several open questions surrounding the investigation.

In July and August 2005, government officials traded attacks with retired Catholic Cardinal Castillo Lara over human rights and press freedom problems. The CEV also issued its annual statement in January 2006 criticizing the Government for not addressing persistent poverty. President Hugo Chavez publicly attacked the bishops and challenged their conclusions. Church officials again criticized the Government in March 2006 for the deteriorating security conditions and rampant crime, exacerbated by the kidnapping and killing of three Catholic school students and their driver with alleged participation by Caracas police.

In February 2006 there was a report that an educational video used by the Government's high school education "mission" depicted NTM missionaries and other groups operating in the indigenous areas as promulgating a doctrine of "terror," "fanatical preaching," and "espionage." The video was used in a program that reportedly serves two million youths. Religious groups raised their complaints to the Government, which reportedly agreed to discontinue use of the video.

The military chaplain corps was comprised exclusively of Catholic priests. Although armed forces members of other religious groups were allowed to attend services of their faith, they did not have the same access to clergy members that Catholic service members enjoyed. In October 2005 the Ministry of Interior and Justice permitted the entry of evangelical chaplains to several of the prisons, positions that formerly had been open only to Catholics.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

#### Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

#### Anti-Semitic Acts

The president, the Government, and their supporters occasionally made comments that were either clearly anti-Semitic or could have been construed as anti-Semitic. In December 2005 speech, President Chavez referred to "descendants of those who crucified Christ and threw founding father Simon Bolivar out of Venezuela." Although an international Jewish group criticized Chavez' remarks as anti-Semitic, local Jewish groups accepted the president's subsequent explanation that he was not making an intentionally anti-Semitic remark. Jewish leaders later met with the president and senior government officials to discuss concerns about anti-Semitism among government sympathizers. These included frequent anti-Semitic remarks on opinion shows broadcast on the official television station and radio as well as in a progovernment national daily newspaper. Jewish leaders also expressed concern over the Government's growing relations with Iran, whose president called repeatedly for the termination of the country of Israel.

#### Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom.

During the period covered by this report there were reports that citizens harassed Mormon missionaries in poor areas. The verbal and physical harassment appeared motivated by the Government's accusations against the NTM missionaries.

#### Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. However, the Government's frequent refusal to meet with U.S. embassy officials generally impeded bilateral communication on this and other topics.

The embassy maintained close contact with various religious communities. The U.S. ambassador met regularly with religious authorities and sought to raise their concerns with appropriate government officials when appropriate and when government officials agreed to meet with embassy representatives.

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